

# A Budapest

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## Bartok Bonanza

By THEODORE STRONGIN

**A** Béla Bartók bonanza has recently arrived, 20-odd disks recorded in his native Hungary on the Qualiton label of Budapest.

At first the disks pose certain problems for the non-Hungarian. Some of the labels and jackets are in that language exclusively. But the music is there to be identified, and well worth it. A portion of it was not available here until Qualiton sent it over.

Other problems arise, too. Is the Qualiton recording of the Bartók Viola Concerto the same as the one listed in the current Schwann Long Playing Record Catalogue under Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft? It has the same performers.

It is the same. When contacted, Deutsche Grammophon waxed quite indignant. The tape had been licensed to them by Qualiton, they said. D. G. G. is the legal distributor of that version here. It has been out for some time (DGG 18874; stereo 138874).

The same goes for Deutsche Grammophon's *The Miraculous Mandarin* (DGG 18873; stereo 138873). And for Westminster's disk of Bartók's *Piano Concerto No. 1* (19003; stereo 17003), a double of Qualiton's. And for a single LP of excerpts from *Mikrokosmos* played by Ditta-Pásztor Bartók, the composer's wife (Mace M9007; stereo (S)M9007). And finally, for *Deux Images for Orchestra* (Op. 10), already available with the same performers on Artia (124; no stereo).

The distributor for Qualiton was contacted at his Queens office. He feels that the duplication may have been an oversight on the Budapest end, since Qualiton is just beginning to send recordings here, and shipped over everything in sight as a starter, indiscriminately.

### Undisputed

All the disks mentioned below are undisputed however, and choice. For instance, Ditta-Pásztor has recorded the six books of *Mikrokosmos* complete (three disks, LPX 1033-35; no stereo). These short piano pieces, 153 of them, for the teaching of children, were written for the use of Bartók's son, Peter. Ditta-Pásztor does not play them slickly (children usually don't, either). Instead, she gets out of them a remarkable amount of deeply felt music. The later ones are anything but beginner's pieces. All, early and late, are steeped in the Bartókian folk atmosphere but few, if any, are literally folk.

Bartók's *Second Violin Sonata* is unlisted in Schwann. Qualiton fills the gap with a performance by Tibor Ney, violinist and Ernő Szegedi, pianist (10-inch disk, HLP, M 1552; no stereo).

Written about 1920, the *Sonata* is one of the first of Bartók's works that registers advanced ideas from the West (Stravinsky and Schoenberg). However, Bartók makes a new idiom completely his own from what he borrows. The sonata is very concentrated, fanciful and exotic in atmosphere. The performance is fine but not surpassing. It needs more pungency.

## Arrangements

Seven Pieces from *Mikrokosmos* for Two Pianos, arranged by Bartók himself, are heard as played by Lajos Dévényi and Tibor Dévai (10-inch disk, LP 1577; no stereo). These, too, are unlisted in Schwann. In them, Bartók does not exploit the slick teamwork possible between the two complementary instruments. He uses the extra piano to achieve heavier accents and thicker sonorities.

For the most part, the "Seven Pieces" are imaginatively played. Once in a while, though, the two-piano stereo-type takes over and the players show off their glistening fingerwork instead of paying attention to the musical idea.

The same happens occasionally on the reverse side, in the Schumann *Andante and Variations* (Op. 46). In general, though, Dévényi and Dévai are an excellent team.

Qualiton offers the Bartók *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* with Péter Solymos and Andor Losonczy, pianists (10-inch disk; HLP MK 1517; no stereo). Columbia has a new version of the same work (ML 6041; stereo MS 6641), with Robert and Gaby Casadesus, pianists.

Columbia's recorded sound is far superior to the Qualiton, and stereo does help this brilliant sonata. Even so, the Hungarian disk has a truer accent. Casadesus and wife are finer virtuosos, but rhythmically they are too soft and yielding for the Sonata.

The problem of which of the two versions to own is

complicated by what appears on the reverse side of the Columbia disk: the two Casadesuses playing Debussy's *Éclaircie et noir* and *Six Epigraphes antiques* to a turn, deliciously, with great beauty of sound in perfect style.

Unavailable in this country, according to Schwann, is Bartók's *Dance Suite* in a solo piano arrangement made by the composer himself (10-inch disk, LP 156; no stereo). Originally it was an orchestral piece. On piano, the suite is a mighty test of pianistic strength, met well by György Sebok, the soloist. It has Bartók's usual mighty rhythms and rich sonorities. On the reverse side, Sebok gives a pleasant account of Debussy's *Children's Corner Suite*.

A two-disk version of *For Children*, Bartók's folk song arrangements written in 1908-09, are played by Ernő Szegedi (HLPXM 1044-45; no stereo). These are concentrated breaths of atmosphere; short, and on the surface, simple, illustrating Bartók's subtlety with piano sound and his rich love of folk music. Mr. Szegedi unfortunately lets his fleet fingers carry him away, instead of his ear. He dims the beauties of these gems by being a virtuoso pianist rather than careful listener.

More piano music, the *Suite Op. 14* and excerpts from other *Children's Pieces* are heard on another disk (10-inch KLP SZK 3509; no stereo), played by Peter Frankl. Mr. Frankl is colorful and crisp in the Suite, not so much so in the children's excerpts.

Mr. Frankl is heard on the



reverse side in **Contrasts**, with Béla Kovács, clarinet and György Pauk, violin. The quality of the recorded sound is only fair (as with most of the Qualiton releases) but the performance of the 3-movement work is idiomatic and relaxed. The playing is not the most polished in the world but it is apt in spirit.

Two ten-inch recordings of rarely heard choral music are especially welcome. On one, the Hungarian National Male Choir, a splendid, brave-sounding group, perfectly trained, is led by Lajos Vass in **Slovak and Hungarian Folksongs** arranged by Bartók (HLP K 2509; no stereo). The chorus sings like the Don Cossacks and other highly trained, popular male groups that have toured the United States, but Bartók saves it from being merely tricky with his dark and surprising harmonies and powerful rhythms.

Bartók shares the other ten-incher back to back with Kodály. The chorus is the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble Imre Csenki conducting (HLP 115; on stereo).



Béla Bartók.

*Qualiton fills the gap*

## Slavic

The Kodály side offers works unlisted in Schwann, great spirited, dark Slavic ones—**Evening Song**, a **Transylvanian Lament** and a choral drama **Annie Miller** (in Hungarian, "Molnar Anna"). It tells a brutal heroic folk legend in throbbing accents.

The Bartók side has the gloomy and foreboding **Prisoner**, the wild and gay **Finding a Husband**, both a cappella, and with piano accompaniment the classic, **Four Slovak Folk Songs**. The piano is too prominent, but the choral singing is straight superior Slavic.

Qualiton and Columbia have both come out with Bartók's **Concerto for Orchestra** the former with the Hungarian Radio Orchestra led by László Somogyi (LPX 123; no stereo), the latter with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra (ML 6026; stereo MS 6626).

The Qualiton version has a strong Hungarian accent. It is no match in virtuosity or in high fidelity sound for the sumptuous Ormandy disk, the last word in modern recording, but in the Ormandy disk, one is more aware of the quality of the performance than of the music.